The Black Cat

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The Mystification of Wentworth.*

BY FRANK X. FINNEGAN.

RALPH WENTWORTH, young, handsome, twenty-six, sat in his bachelor apartments staring in amazement at a letter he had just opened and at the check which had dropped from the envelope. With puzzled brow he looked from one to the other, but there was nothing there to enlighten him. The letter was addressed in his name and to his rooms. The check was made out in his favor — both were very evidently meant for him.

But the puzzled expression of his face only deepened when he read the letter through a second time:

OFFICE OF THE PLANET.

Dear Sir: — We are glad to inform you that your story, entered in our prize competition that closed November 1st, has been awarded a prize of $250, and we take pleasure in handing you herewith our check for that amount. Hoping we will be favored with other contributions from your pen, we are

Yours sincerely,
PLANET PUBLISHING COMPANY,
JERELY ADAMS, *President.*

MR. RALPH WENTWORTH.

What did it all mean? Wentworth had never written a story in his life — of that he was positive. The writing of a letter was

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to him a dreaded ordeal, postponed as often as possible. He had never even heard of the *Planet* competition until he opened the letter in his hand.

Yet here it was, addressed to him, and here was the $250 check. That, at least, was real. The Planet Publishing Company he knew to be a substantial corporation with a big bank account. The check was made out in his name on a reputable bank and was even certified, that there might be no doubt of its validity.

It looked to Wentworth at first blush as though he were two hundred and fifty ahead without any effort on his part. But the next moment he felt ashamed of the thought.

"It belongs to some other Ralph Wentworth, of course," he said to himself, "some poor fellow who forgot to enclose his address in his excitement when sending them his story, and the *Planet* people probably got my address in the directory and decided it must be me. I'll send the check back with a note of explanation."

He felt so virtuous over this renunciation of the substantial prize that had dropped into his hands so unexpectedly that he started at once to write the note to the *Planet*.

But on second thought he stopped.

"Hold on a minute, son," he said to himself, "there's no rush about it, and I've got a queer notion that there's something odd behind all this. I believe I'll go down to the *Planet* office and look into it a bit."

In ten minutes Wentworth was in the street, headed for the newspaper office and still revolving the amazing situation in his mind.

He could not reconcile the opposing features, try as he would. It seemed ridiculously simple at first glance — he had not written a story for the prize and therefore the prize could not belong to him. But why had he received it? That was the point that could not be explained offhand and before he reached the newspaper office he had decided upon a plan of action that would set all doubts at rest.

He would ask to see the manuscript of the prize story — merely through curiosity, he was forced to admit to himself. By no

process of reasoning could he bring himself to hope that his mission might result in profit to himself.

At the office of the Planet Publishing Company he was met by a suave young man, solicitous to serve him.

"I am Mr. Wentworth," said Ralph, expecting the *Planet* man to be properly impressed.

"Yes, sir," said the clerk, "what can I do for you?"

"I received this note from the *Planet* today," said Wentworth, producing the mysterious letter. The clerk read it through, and his manner changed at once.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Wentworth," he exclaimed, "how can we serve you?"

Wentworth grew a trifle embarrassed.

"Well, the fact is," he stammered, "if it isn't too much trouble I would like to have a look at the original manuscript of the — of my story. You see, there's a point or two about it that I have been — er — rather hazy about in my own mind, and if you could oblige me with an opportunity of — well, studying it a bit, I would consider it a great favor."

The prize winner was a bit red and disconcerted when he had stumbled through this speech, but the *Planet* man did not notice it. He was overcome by the honor of personally addressing the winner of the prize story competition concerning which he had heard and talked so much.

"Certainly, Mr. Wentworth," he said, "I have no doubt that can be arranged. If you'll be good enough to take a seat and wait a few moments I will speak to Mr. Adams."

Wentworth sat down near a window and the polite young man disappeared into an inner office. In a few moments he returned with a small packet of manuscript.

"There you are, Mr. Wentworth," he said, handing him the story, "I suppose you must think pretty highly of that."

Wentworth said nothing, but bowed his thanks and reached rather eagerly for the manuscript. Then he turned to the window, took one glance at the first page and started in disbelief of his own eyes.

It was in his handwriting.

He sat down with his back to the obliging clerk, and, with the

manuscript on his knee, looked at it again. There was no doubt of it. Either he had penned those pages or the other Ralph Wentworth carried out the duplication of personalities to the absurd length of duplicating his handwriting.

With his brain in a whirl of amazement and a rather creepy feeling in his spine telling him there was something uncanny about the affair, Ralph looked for little peculiarities he knew his handwriting possessed — the crossing of "t's" and the making of final "d's" and "e's." They were all there. Beyond the shadow of doubt he had written the story.

But how? Under what supernatural circumstances had he written a prize story — he who had never in his life written a letter more than three pages in length? How had he addressed and mailed it without the facts leaving the slightest impression on his mind?

"Well, let's see what it's about," he said to himself, and with a strange feeling of unreality possessing him, quite as though he were someone else and knew it all the time, he turned to the first page of the manuscript and, under the title, "The Thing That Moved," read as follows:

Dr. Chester slowly stirred his coffee, and remained silent so long that Holabird, sitting opposite him at the table, playfully snapped his fingers to bring him back to earth.

"Come, come, doc," he said, "this won't do. Wake up. What were you dreaming of? Some fair charmer of the past?" So saying he filled a tiny glass with brandy and pushed the decanter toward his companion.

With a start the doctor had roused himself from his reverie and, sighing deeply, rubbed his eyes as though he would brush away the memories that had enthralled him.

"Holabird," he said, after a moment, "this is the anniversary of the affair that saddened my whole life, cut short my career as a physician and made me what you have found me — a purposeless, roving spendthrift without an ambition in life."

"And what was this affair that had so disastrous a termination?" asked Holabird, lightly. He had not noted the serious tone in which the doctor spoke, and expected a jest for an answer.

"The death of my wife," said Dr. Chester, gravely.

"Your what?" he demanded, sitting up suddenly and staring at his friend, "When did you have a wife?" He broke off suddenly when he saw the seriousness of the doctor's face, and then added:

"I beg your pardon, doctor. I am a fool. I might have known that since much of your past life is unknown to me there might have been ——"

Dr. Chester raised his hand.

"It's all right, Tom," he said, "there is no need of any apology. It is a chapter in my life that has been closed so long and at which so few of my friends have even had a glimpse that you could not be expected to know anything about it. In the circle in which I have moved for the last ten years I pass as a bachelor. I am better satisfied that it is so. It saves me the pain of making explanations. It prevents the re-opening of the old wound. When I met you a few years ago I saw no reason for making an exception of you and letting you know there had been a romance and a tragedy in my life.

"But as our acquaintance ripened and we grew closer and closer together, I have frequently been on the point of telling you the story. Tonight, the anniversary of Mildred's death, the mood is upon me again. I have thought of it all day. That was why I was so preoccupied at dinner tonight. Had I not determined to tell you the story I would not now have mentioned the subject which has been ever present in my mind for more than a decade of years."

"Whatever you say, doctor, I shall, of course, regard as a sacred confidence," said Holabird, solemnly.

"I know that, Tom," said Dr. Chester warmly, "or I would still remain silent."

He poured out a glass of brandy, tossed it off and began his story, to which Holabird listened with absorbed interest.

"When the World's Fair was at its height in Chicago," began Dr. Chester, "I came here from New York as a pleasure-seeker. I was wealthy, happy and independent. After graduation from two of the big medical schools in New York I rapidly acquired a large practice, and its returns, together with my private fortune, made my lot envied by the struggling young physicians who had at-

tended the medical college with me and whose lines had not fallen in such pleasant places.

"Until I came to the World's Fair I had never looked on a woman with more than passing interest. By some chance I had escaped the usual juvenile love affairs through which most young men pass in their callow days, and I flattered myself I was proof against the attractions of the sex. I had not met Mildred then. One night a Chicago physician, one of my old school friends, invited me to spend an evening at his home. That night the whole course of my life was changed. The woman whom fate had reserved for me was there. She was his sister, Mildred Atherton."

Dr. Chester paused to pour another glass of brandy, and Holabird relighted his cigar.

"I will not bore you, Tom, with a description of her beauty," the doctor went on, "or of my enchantment when I found she was disposed to look upon me with favor. Enough to say that after a brief and somewhat impetuous courtship Mildred consented to be my wife. Before the close of the Exposition — less than three months after I first saw her — we were married.

"Of course, I was supremely happy. Like a boy on his first holiday, I planned a lengthy bridal tour which included not only the traditional swing around the circle of the great eastern cities, but a week of perfect rest and quiet at my father's farm in central New York. Mildred was delighted. Travel was her hobby, but, pleased as she was by the novel sights of the seacoast cities, she was even more charmed with the unusual surroundings of the dear old farm I had always called 'home.'

"Reared in a city, and knowing nothing of the delights of country life, my bride revelled in the peaceful delights of the farm and its surroundings. Chiefly she loved the old well — my boyhood's friend. Night after night, hanging on my arm, she would stroll down the shaded walk to the old mossy well, and, leaning over the curb, watch the bucket as I sent it down, down, until it plunged into the ice-cold water. Then, with smiles of childish delight, she would watch its ascent until, brimming with the clear water, it rested on the curb. Then she insisted on drinking from the battered old bucket, declaring that a cup or a glass took away the freshness of the water, and in this I smilingly humored her.

"Well, at last the week on the farm was over and we came home to the house I had ordered prepared for my queen in Chicago. Everything was as I had directed. Nothing was lacking to make the little home a miniature palace and Mildred was as delighted with it as she had been a few days before with the homely comforts and rude surroundings of the farmhouse.

"But before a week was out I saw a change in my girl — the first shadow I had ever seen upon her brow. I noticed that she seemed worried and abstracted when she thought I was not observing her, and when I questioned her she insisted she was not worried by anything in the world. She strove in every way to allay my anxiety, but, despite her best efforts, I saw that her mental trouble increased. Sometimes she would sit staring out of the window as though she were witnessing some great catastrophe in the street, and when I sought an explanation she laughed at my inquiries and assured me nothing was wrong.

"At first I ascribed it all to nervousness and hysteria and I applied all my professional skill to diagnosing the case. But as the days went by she grew more and more worried, and at length, one night, she admitted there was some mysterious trouble with her throat that was annoying her. With all my fears aroused I at once made a most minute and searching examination, but at its close I was forced to confess myself baffled. I could find absolutely nothing abnormal — nothing that should have given my wife the least trouble.

"I tried to explain to her that her trouble was purely imaginary and advised a change of scene to get her mind on other things. I planned a trip to Cuba for the winter, but she responded apathetically and seemed to grow more worried and abstracted.

"The mental strain began to tell on her appearance. Her sprightliness was all gone. She was pale and languid, with a scared look in her eyes constantly, except when she strove to banish it while talking with me. She took no interest in anything — theatres, society, drives, books — all were put aside. I grew alarmed lest what my professional training told me must be imagination should develop into a real malady.

"One night as I was dropping off to sleep I was startled to observe that Mildred appeared to be trembling beside me. I

turned and saw that she was in a paroxysm of fear, and that both her hands were clutching at her throat. Springing from bed I turned up the light and begged her to tell me what had startled her. In whispers she finally told me the awful fear that had been clutching her heart with a hand of ice. She believed there was something in her throat *and she believed it was alive.*"

Holabird started from his chair, staring at Dr. Chester in horror and amazement.

"Alive?" he repeated.

"Yes," said the doctor, "that was her ever-present nightmare. I tried in vain to soothe her, believing more firmly than ever that she was the victim of her fancies. I tried to explain the impossibility of what she feared, but she lay in my arms, shuddering and hysterical, the rest of the night. From that time the horror seemed to be with her more constantly than ever, because she made no attempt to conceal it. Day after day I would return from my office to find her pale and enervated, worn to a shadow through worry.

"I was in despair. All my arguments, all my scientific explanations, were of no avail. Little by little she told me how the Thing felt, to her disordered imagination. At first, she said, she noticed a slight tickling sensation in her throat and tried to remove it by coughing. When she coughed it would disappear, but after a time it was present again, and sometimes in a different place. At the beginning her nervousness was caused by fear that she was becoming ill — developing some throat or lung trouble that might become permanent. But one afternoon, while she was lying on a couch, the horror of her life came upon her suddenly.

"She felt the Thing moving in her chest. Clinging to my arm while she told me, my unhappy wife described the frightful agony that convulsed her that day as the moments slipped by, and as with each one the Thing seemed to move closer to her mouth. Finally, she said, she burst the spell that seemed to hold her and rushing into another room, fell upon her knees and prayed. The sudden action brought relief, for, when she was able to collect her senses and fix them upon the horror, the Thing was gone. There was no movement there.

"Then she prayed that I might be right when I told her it was

nervousness that was preying upon her, but again and again came the fearful, creeping sensation, until she convinced herself that the Thing she was cursed with must be alive. She hugged her secret to her breast. She dared not tell even me, lest I should think she was going mad, until at last the horror of it overpowered her and she broke down and confessed.

"Even after that my professional training scoffed at her story of despair. I could not bring myself to believe there was anything in the case but disordered nerves and an overtaxed brain, and I prescribed the physician's only remedy in such an emergency — change of air and of scene. I dropped everything and took her on a long tour, but I might as well have remained at home with her. The Thing traveled with us.

"It never left her mind for an instant, and at night she would startle me by clutching my arm suddenly, grasping at her throat and whispering that it was there. I began to fear her mind would give way under the strain, and after our return home, to satisfy myself and leave no means untried, I summoned in consultation two of the most noted physicians in the country. I told them everything, and begged them, as brother practitioners, to give my unfortunate Mildred the most careful and painstaking examination possible.

"At its close I was as much in the dark as ever. Dr. Rupert and Prof. Hathaway agreed there was nothing — absolutely nothing — about my wife's throat that should cause any such hallucinations, and their judgment coincided with mine, that the trouble was purely one of the brain and nerves, and should be treated accordingly. I told all this to Mildred, who had faded away to a shadow and had a fixed stare of horror in her eyes. I begged her, as she valued her happiness and my own — nay, her very life — to make a desperate effort to dispel the hallucinations which were wrecking her constitution. She smiled sadly — oh, so sadly, Tom, — and said she would try.

"A week later she awoke me one night with a frenzied shriek of despair and agony. I sprang from bed to turn up the light, and when I turned toward her again she was dead."

"Dead?" ejaculated Holabird, who had half risen from his seat and was staring at the doctor.

"Dead," repeated Dr. Chester quietly. "Her hands were clutching her throat and the expression upon her face was one of the most intense horror. I have witnessed many deaths, but never one like that. The end came so quickly I could not believe that hope and life were gone, and in a frenzy of despair I applied all the tests known to the profession. I called for help and dispatched servants for Dr. Rupert and Prof. Hathaway. When they came I had given up hope and was sitting like a statue, staring at the dead face of my wife. Both physicians made a brief examination of the body, and after assuring themselves that Mildred was dead, led me away to another apartment. I was calm, but it was the calm of a dazed man, and the two doctors decided to leave me alone and remain within call for a time.

"For an hour I sat there, stunned and motionless. Then I was seized with an insane idea that I could yet resuscitate Mildred — that hope was not gone, that there was still life. I rushed to the room where she lay and flung myself upon the body, in an agony of grief, my face pressed against her beautiful white neck. As I lay there my numbed senses were suddenly startled into activity by something which perhaps appealed principally to my trained professional sense. Her throat beneath my cheek was throbbing with faint, regular pulsations!

"Instantly I arose and stared at the dead face. There was no hint of life. I applied my ear to the heart. All was still and pulseless. But when I placed my ear directly upon the spot on Mildred's neck where I had first discerned the movement I again discerned a rapid, rhythmic pulsation!

"I shouted aloud for help, and when a servant came in, trembling, I sent him for the two doctors, who were smoking and talking in an upper room. Barring the door behind the gaping servant I told the physicians of my discovery. In amazement they tried the experiment, and each distinctly felt the movement. Prof. Hathaway looked at me rather pointedly after he had examined the body and said:

"'Chester, there is one method of solving this riddle. Do you object?'

"'To a post-mortem examination?' I asked.

"He nodded and so did Dr. Rupert. I hesitated a moment.

"'I do not object to an examination,' I said, for I felt I was on the threshold of a solution of the mystery, 'but I will not be present. I will leave it in your hands.' I hurried out of the room, and in half an hour Prof. Hathaway sought me out.

"'Chester,' he said, 'the examination is over.'

"'What did you do?' I asked, half fearing to learn.

"'We made a small incision in the throat where the strange signs of life developed,' he said.

"'And you found —— ?' I demanded.

"'This,' he replied, holding forth on his hand the Thing that had hounded my Mildred to the grave — a small, green water-lizard."

"What?" cried Holabird, springing up, "alive?"

"Alive," said Dr. Chester. "The poor girl had undoubtedly swallowed it in embryo while drinking at the old well on the farm, and it had lived and grown in her stomach."

"And that," said Holabird, with starting eyes, "was the Thing ——"

"Which cost her life," concluded the doctor, "that's all my story, Tom. Pass the brandy."

. . . . . .

When he had finished the story Wentworth mopped his brow and stared fixedly for a few minutes at the last page of the manuscript. He felt, in a hazy, half-defined sort of way, that he had once, somewhere or other, heard an incident related of the nature described in the story. But that he had written the story — that he was capable of writing it — he at once dismissed from his mind as absurd and impossible. Yet there it lay before him in his own handwriting, a mute witness to the fact that he had written it.

The thing was positively uncanny, and it was a solemn and rather scared face he presented to the obliging clerk when he handed back the manuscript.

"Find what you wanted, sir?" asked the clerk, brightly.

"Oh — er — ah — yes, I found it," stammered Wentworth, "it's all right, thank you. I'm very much obliged for your kindness."

"Not at all. Come in again, sir," said the clerk affably.

Wentworth stammered something incoherent and stumbled out of the office in a daze. The thing was fast getting possession of him. What did it all mean? he asked himself for the hundredth time. There was no question now that the check was intended for him — that he and no other Ralph Wentworth had won the prize. But how had it happened?

Unable to frame a logical answer to his own question, he reached the street in a dreamy, unbelieving state of mind, and instinctively turned the right corners and dodged the vehicles until he found himself at his own door. His valet, quiet, imperturbable Johnson, admitted him. Johnson took his hat and coat and deftly wheeled an easy chair to the fire. Wentworth watched him absently.

Suddenly an idea struck him.

"Johnson," he exclaimed, "have you ever seen around here a long envelope — one of the sort they call document envelopes — I mean one with anything in it. Big and bulky, you know."

His valet studied a moment, while Wentworth watched him anxiously.

"You mean like this, sir?" he asked, going to a cabinet and producing a packet of long envelopes.

"Yes, yes," said Wentworth, eagerly, "that's the sort. Did you ever notice one of those with anything in it?"

"I think I did, sir," said Johnson.

"When?" demanded Wentworth. "How was it? What did you do with it?"

"The one I saw I mailed, sir," said the valet, "I hope there's nothing wrong, sir."

"Mailed?" echoed Wentworth, "to whom? How did you happen to mail it?"

"I don't remember now how it was addressed, sir," said Johnson, "but I remember one morning I found one of those big envelopes with a letter in it all sealed and addressed and stamped on your desk here, and I mailed it. You always leave any mail here for me to drop in the box if you have been writing late at night, sir, you know."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Wentworth, eagerly, "but how do you happen to remember this letter?"

"Well, sir," said Johnson, "it had three or four stamps on it and it was so big and bulky and heavy, sir, that I sort of kept it in mind. I never had a letter like that here before, sir."

Wentworth was pacing the floor excitedly by that time. The trail was growing warm.

"Now, Johnson, try and think," he commanded, "can't you remember when it was you found that letter here?"

"I'm almost positive, sir," said his valet, "that it was the next morning after you came home so late from Mr. Holroyd's bachelor dinner, sir."

Wentworth suddenly ceased pacing the floor, and clapped his hands together with a mighty smack.

"That's it," he cried, excitedly, "that bachelor dinner brings it all back to me. That's where I heard it. By George, that's right. Doc' Baldwin told the story. That's the very thing."

"Yes, sir," agreed Johnson, who had been watching his master's antics in some alarm. Wentworth stared at him as though he had just become aware of his presence in the room.

"Johnson," he said suddenly, placing both his hands on the shoulders of his servant, "did you see me when I came in that night?"

"I did, sir," said Johnson, simply.

"Tell the truth now, Johnson," commanded Wentworth, "was I drunk?"

"No, sir," answered the valet, "I should say you were a bit excited, sir. I helped you off with your clothes and you went right to bed, sir, inside of five minutes."

Wentworth stared at the floor a long time, and then his face slowly cleared.

"By George!" he muttered at length, "I got up in the night and wrote that in my sleep!"

"Yes, sir," said Johnson, "what will you wear this afternoon, sir?"

Their Golden Wedding.*

BY HENRY J. JORDAN.

EVERYWHERE throughout the neighborhood they were known as Aunt Jane and Uncle Billy. Whenever, as occasionally happened, some one came in from the world outside and inquired for Mr. and Mrs. William Brown, the aged pioneers, most people shook the head and replied that no such persons were known to them. Their married life had been ever childless, and this assertion of kinship by their acquaintances was a comfort to Aunt Jane and Uncle Billy, and a solace in their lonely condition.

Into the log cabin, still standing, ragged and desolate, on the right of the lane, he had led Aunt Jane a bride fifty years before. Often, after the completion of the frame dwelling, the question of destroying the cabin was debated, earnestly and exhaustively, and once was even agreed upon and the day of demolition set. But the memories clustering about it, like the recollection of the kind deeds of an old friend, proved too numerous and too sacred. Thus, not only was the edict of destruction recalled and the cabin suffered to remain unharmed, but it was treated with greater tenderness than before — as much tenderness, in fact, as if constituting a third member of the family. In it they celebrated their silver wedding.

The new home, it is true, had been completed a few weeks before the silver anniversary, and for over a year they had been planning to welcome their friends to the celebration in what was, in that modest era, the finest dwelling for miles around. Indeed, the furniture was all in place, the rag-carpet laid, and everything in readiness. At the last moment, however, the yearnings became irresistible for the old home, where they had passed so many years of hard but happy toil, of privations amounting at times almost

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to want, but all crowned in the end with contentment and abundance. To have abandoned the cabin just then seemed to them like leaving one of their oldest and truest friends unbidden to the feast.

The new home, into which they moved immediately after the celebration, was of the type so common in country places — a white two-story structure, with green shutters, and a small, low kitchen placed humbly at the rear. The grove of apple, peach and cherry trees surrounding it, and, in spring and summer, almost screening it from view, extended on both sides of the lane along the descending slope, southward to the main road. From the rear of the house northward, the ground rose slowly at first, then rather abruptly, to the wooded crest half a mile away. About midway between the cabin and the new home, and at the base of a large, spreading maple, a spring, clear and cold, bubbled forth, whose divided waters murmured in rival streams along either side of the lane.

As the fiftieth anniversary drew near, their thoughts turned almost uninterruptedly to preparations for the celebration they had so long been planning should crown that event. Not that it ever entered their heads to make the anniversary the occasion for a gaudy show or an exhibition of material splendor, much as their worldly condition at the time would have warranted such display. Far different was their wish. It was their hope, intensified by the deep-seated feeling that, somehow, their earthly pilgrimage was about closing, to compress within the few events of the celebration as much as possible of gratitude for half a century of sacrifice, honest helpfulness, and passionate love. As if by mutual agreement, yet without the shadow of an allusion to it by either, their every act exemplified this hope.

Gradually, as the days passed, intimations grew more numerous and convincing that a crisis in their lives was near. These whisperings out of the heavens were no idle fancies to them; they were as real as the voices that spoke to the seers and prophets. Each prayed, earnestly and fervently, that the other might be spared these hauntings, and yet neither scarcely hoped that the prayer would be answered. The fear, much dwelt upon, that some vague harm may come, often ripens into a conviction that it will come.

Their efforts to conceal these disquieting fears and disguise their real feelings were by turns ludicrous and pathetic. To dissemble is no easy task, they learned, when tried for the first time at seventy-five.

One mild evening in May they were seated, an old custom with them in pleasant weather, on the rustic bench within the railing enclosing the spring, talking over their plans for the celebration. She seemed depressed, her spirits out of harmony with the youthful gladness of spring. Suspecting that the fears troubling his own soul were likewise disturbing her, he tried to divert her mind to other and pleasanter thoughts without letting her see that he guessed the cause of her despondency.

"See," he said, trying hard to play the boy once more, "see me do what I haven't tried in years. I'll show you we're as young and lively as ever." And he proceeded to kneel down and drink out of the spring. But his stiffened joints and feeble, unsteady limbs enabled him to achieve only indifferent success in this unusual rôle.

"Many's the time both of us drank of it that way, years ago," she remarked sadly.

"Yes, and you could do it just as well today as you ever did, as well as I have done now, if you had a mind to — and I'd let you."

Her lips quivered, as if attempting a reply, but she remained silent.

Quick to see the failure of his strategy, he was as quickly ready, like a good general, with other plans, along other lines. He spoke with a brave show of unconcern. "I must tell you this minute how neatly I've planned the trip to New York and down to Connecticut, to Kitty's. I'll be gone only a few days."

"If you could plan some way to give up that journey you'd please me better, William."

"And not have Kitty with us? You don't mean that, Jane, I'm sure. She must be here — your own sister."

This trip to New York, and to Kitty's, in Connecticut, had long been a source of worry to both of them. Aunt Jane was strong in her opposition, and yet she wanted Kitty, her sister and sole surviving relative, with her during the celebration. Besides, they had not met in years. Much correspondence had passed regarding

the visit, and Kitty had once given her promise to come. Later, however, owing to failing health and increasing infirmity, she changed her mind, concluding that the journey was beyond her strength. But Uncle Billy held the opinion, in which Aunt Jane concurred, that if he should go all the way to her home for her, she would somehow manage to come.

Then he had his heart set on the trip for another reason. He wanted to visit New York for Aunt Jane's sake. All their lives they had heard of the wealth and the wonders of the great city, and had often expressed the hope of some day seeing its throbbing, restless life. But the years had passed and New York remained unvisited. She would not listen to his entreaties to accompany him now. Her age and infirmities had robbed her of her courage as well as her longing to go.

"Well, if you won't go with me," he jestingly told her, "I must use my eyes for both. I'll return with strange tales, you may be sure." But in truth he meant to return with a surprise for her — with gifts from the shops of the great city.

"And I'll be all alone," she moaned, "while you are gone."

"Indeed not, Jane." He spoke in his tenderest tones. "Our man John and his good wife Sarah will be here. Besides, Granny Wilson will come and stay all the time I'm away."

"That's kind of Granny, but you know, William, we haven't been separated twenty-four hours since we were married. Now, at last, in my old days, you're leaving me alone."

The struggle was painful, and he would cheerfully have accepted any alternative. He reasoned with her, pleaded, and persuaded, by turns. Finally he won.

"I'll let you go," she told him, falteringly, "on one condition. You must write me a letter every day you are away from me. That'll make you seem nearer. I'll know you are alive, then, too."

This pledge, so important in her eyes, appeared simple enough to him. No doubt it was his intention, without any promise, to write her daily. During their courtship he had made an enviable record as correspondent, and she often read over to him some of the highly prized, but faded productions of his pen.

In due season Granny Wilson arrived, and all things were in readiness for his departure. When the New York Express pulled

into Rosedale station many were there to bid him off. Aunt Jane was not of the number. Her grief was to her a sacred thing, not to be exposed to public view. She took leave of him in the place she thought the most appropriate — her own home. She exacted a renewal of the promise about writing, and told him she would call herself for the letters. Then, with many an admonition to look well after his health and personal safety, now, especially, that she could not be with him, she managed to bid him adieu in brave tones, proud, for his sake, to be able to restrain her tears.

She watched the carriage descend the lane and swing into the road. It was soon on the crest of the ridge. She waited for him to turn and wave to her as he had always done. She thought he waved more times, and, apparently, with greater feeling than ever before, and the thought pleased her. Then the sorrels moved forward, and he quickly passed out of her sight.

The afternoon was long, even with Granny to speed the hours. She remained up that night until his train had time to reach New York. On thinking how tired he must be after the long ride, she reproached herself for the pledge exacted of him to write immediately on arrival.

During the following day her mind was occupied with a single thought — the arrival of the New York Express with its precious mail. The hours dragged, but finally passed. The mail had scarcely been distributed when she and John arrived at the post-office behind the sorrel mares. He, eager to save her the trouble of getting out of the carriage, offered to go in for the letter. No, she insisted on getting it herself. Pride and confidence were equally mingled in her tones as she asked for the mail for Jane Brown. The postmaster had to tell her a second time that none awaited her. Seeing her disappointment, he kindly explained that it was too soon to expect any word from Uncle Billy. She could not understand it. She knew he had written. The New York mail had arrived. The rest was mystery. Her heart began to sink.

The evening shadows had deepened when they reached the crest of the hill affording the first glimpse of home. The whippoorwill, in the distant wood, was pouring out its wild love-notes. She listened, and recalled the sweetness of its song on her first evening

in the cabin. Its notes now seemed less joyous, more plaintive, than then.

On the evening of the second day, she knew there must be two letters awaiting her. But the postmaster shook his head — there wasn't even one. He told her that, occasionally, the New York mail was strangely delayed, which, no doubt, was the case now.

When she inquired for her letters the third day, the tremulous note in her voice arrested the postmaster's attention. Although he went over the bunch of mail carefully a second time, he could find nothing bearing her name. He ventured no explanation this time. She noted this. The world seemed filled with mystery. She was sure of but one thing — *he* was not to blame. He had written each day as he promised. The fault lay elsewhere. On reaching home she complained of being ill, and retired immediately. Through an open window the whippoorwill's song came floating in. But feeling that it disturbed her rest, she ordered the window closed.

In the morning her illness continued and she decided to remain in bed. Granny wanted to summon the doctor, but Aunt Jane would not hear of it — saying she would be up and around in a few hours. She sat up a while in the evening, to await John's return from the postoffice. But on his announcement of no letters, she rose to return to her bed, and might have fallen on the way had not Granny and Sarah assisted her. The following day her condition was worse, even alarming, and Nancy Horton, who had been called in, sent for the doctor at once. He called, adjusted his glasses and re-adjusted them many times, took note of all her symptoms, and gave some medicine and much counsel.

During the day, however, Nancy got from Granny the story of the non-arrival of the letters, and was not long in reaching the conclusion that she understood the complaint and its cure better than the doctor. That evening she had John drive her to the postoffice. As usual, there was no letter. On the sixth and seventh days she repeated the visits, but, as before, without result.

Meanwhile Aunt Jane continued to sink slowly. The occasional fits of delirium were soon followed by partial, and, later, by total unconsciousness. The doctor alone remained hopeful. He changed his diagnosis daily, and grew more confident with each change.

On the eighth day Uncle Billy returned. His face, as usual, beamed happiness and kindness. Unmindful of the scowls of the women, he proceeded to describe the pretty gifts he had for Aunt Jane. "But don't tell her. I want to surprise her," he chuckled.

His gleeful manner was more than Nancy could bear.

"There are things Aunt Jane would prize more than trinkets from New York. Why did you break your solemn pledge to her, Uncle Billy?"

"How? What pledge? My promise to have Kitty come? She was too feeble. I did my best. It was out of the question. Has she worried about it?"

"Worried!" Nancy could scarce control her anger. In brief, sharp words she described Aunt Jane's condition. The cause was not Kitty's failure to come — of which they knew nothing. How could they know of it since he, the source of their information, had sent not a word? "You promised to write every day, and yet you did not write even once," she said bitterly.

"But I did write," he protested. "I wrote every day, just as I promised." He swore it as solemnly as he knew how. "I'll go in at once and explain to her."

"No," and as she spoke, Nancy took a position before the sick-room. "No; if you wrote, prove it. Where are the letters? Day after day we inquired for letters for Jane Brown and Mrs. William Brown, and got none."

"Jane Brown! Mrs. William Brown!" He repeated the words slowly, and as if dazed. Then, apparently recollecting something, he rushed out the door. A few minutes later he and John and the sorrels were hastening to the post-office. They returned at a gallop, the mares white with foam.

Not waiting for the carriage to stop, he leaped out. In his haste, his feet caught in the reins and he was thrown heavily to the ground. But giving no heed to the fall, he rushed in to Nancy.

"Here they are — the seven letters," he exclaimed. "One for every day."

She read the address carefully. "These letters," she said, in tones indicating her confusion, "are addressed to Jane Minturn. Who is — " but before she could finish the question, the whole truth flashed upon her.

"But why do you still address her as Jane Minturn?" she asked.

"That's the way I addressed her when I wrote her before. That was her name then — Jane Minturn."

Nancy spoke slowly. The bitterness was gone from her tones. "We'll go in," she said. "Maybe she can be made to understand."

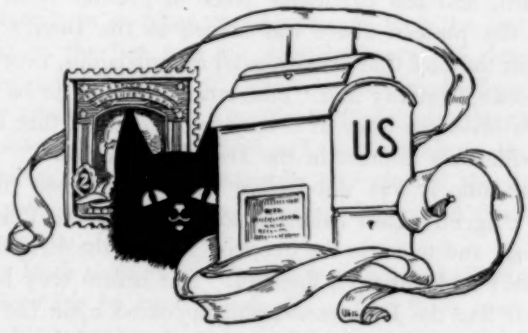
But the eyes that always beamed kindness, and the lips that broke only in sweetness and love, had closed forever.

. . . . . .

In the procession that moved down the lane, two days later, and out to the cemetery, Aunt Jane and Uncle Billy were borne side by side.

The doctor spoke of the fall from the carriage. But Nancy held a different theory.

Granny Wilson remained over night with John and Sarah. "And to think this was the day," she whispered to Sarah, on retiring; "the day of their golden wedding."



The Fourth at Pilgrim's Rest.*

BY JAMES O. FAGAN.

THOUGH Joe Sanborn, otherwise California Joe, was known by name and reputation to every gold digger in South Africa during the early seventies, yet there was one side to his character that was not fully appreciated until some time after his arrival at Pilgrim's Rest—his devotion to the "Stars and Stripes."

Pilgrim's Rest, with its population of one thousand whites, half British subjects and perhaps a hundred Americans, is situated about one hundred and fifty miles northwest from Delagoa Bay, and as you approach the place from the Transvaal side, you notice the wagon road before you winds up a very precipitous and rocky hill to a plateau above, on which the flagpole, the court house, the postoffice and the liquor saloons were at that time located.

There are four distinct breaks or horizontal ridges on the face of this hill, and the particular piece of ground from the plain below to the plateau above was known as the Devil's Knuckles. Now, from the fact that every pound of provisions, every bottle of "cape smoke," brandy and "blue ruin" gin had to be hauled up this four-ribbed precipice, it is easy to understand that the diggers took considerable interest in the Devil's Knuckles.

At that time it was not known with any degree of certainty whether Pilgrim's Rest belonged to the Boers, the Portuguese or the British, and to settle the question forever the British residents got together and put up a flagstaff. But before they had time to hoist their flag the Irish contingent appeared upon the scene, and as those who did not want to start a row were in the majority, the flagpole remained unadorned.

It was then that the American colony suddenly became aware that it had a country too, which was "some potatoes." Forthwith

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its representative — California Joe — notified the holiday committee of Diggers' Day, the one day in the year which had been chosen for a general jollification at the fields, and which happened to fall on the Fourth of July, that it would be a good idea to hoist the Stars and Stripes on the aforementioned British flagpole on the Fourth, leaving the pole at the service of the other nations for the rest of the year.

But as unanimous consent could not be obtained to this proposition, the diggers' committee finally decided upon a novel competition to settle the flag-raising question. The rival nations were severally invited to enter a span of oxen and wagon in a hill-climbing contest up the Devil's Knuckles, to be held on the morning of Diggers' Day.

By six o'clock on the morning of that day, fully fifteen hundred diggers and friends from Mac-Mac, Leydenburg, and surrounding places, as well as two or three thousand Kaffirs, were spread out over the Knuckles, anxiously awaiting for the first span to start.

It was calculated that nine-tenths of the diggers in Pilgrim's Rest had wagered every ounce of gold dust in their possession on their favorite span, and consequently it was a very noisy and excited crowd.

Five spans of oxen were entered in the contest, and in drawing for the rotation in starting, the Americans took the last place.

The first on the list was the German entry, a heavy, deep-chested and powerful span of Basuto cattle, twenty-four in number. They crested the first Knuckle in three minutes and fifteen seconds, the second in six minutes and twenty seconds, the third in eleven minutes and fifty-two seconds, and crossed the line at the top in an even sixteen minutes, beating the record for the climb by a few seconds.

Then the Irish span of Natal oxen went up in gallant style and beat the Germans by twenty seconds. The Boer span of long-horned Cape steers then tried it, but couldn't stand the pace, and broke down completely before reaching the top.

Next in order came the British string. This was a magnificent span of red oxen with white bellies, driven by a veteran transport rider, a Scotchman named McIntosh. After the grandest kind of a drive, which was finished amid a pandemonium of noise and

excitement, they succeeded in tying the Irishmen to the splitting of a second.

Finally the great loaded buck wagon was again run down to the foot of the hill, and the American string of twenty-eight coal-black Zulu steers was quickly lined up and slipped under the yokes. Then the driver of the team, a giant Kaffir, bearing the name of Ajax and conceded to be the cleverest whip in all South Africa, had a conference with California Joe.

"Look here, Boss," said the Kaffir, "in my country at every festival the cattle are driven past the witch doctors and the head doctor points his finger at a steer and yells, 'Bulala,' which means kill. Immediately the people take up the cry of 'Bulala,' and make a rush for the doomed animal, and the cattle, understanding only too well the meaning of that dreadful yell, break in headlong flight out of the Kraal, in a mad stampede for liberty. Now, Boss, when we get started up that last Knuckle — "

California Joe understood, and just then a rifle shot, which was the signal for starting, rang through the air, and the American string of short-limbed Zulus made a brisk start for the first Knuckle. Singling out the hasty steers by name and commanding them in a voice that sounded like a low growl to take it easy, Ajax very coolly surmounted the first Knuckle — beaten by every span in the contest.

The result was highly disappointing to the Americans, but the grin on the good-natured face of the giant Ajax widened a full inch. Clipping a few seconds off the regulation breathing spell, he started his string for the second Knuckle, and now moved the length of his span, emitting a strange, rasping sound like the buzzing of a wasp, while overhead his forty-foot lash was screaming and whistling like a nor'wester through the rigging of a ship.

Passing over the second Knuckle, the American string was still thirty seconds to the bad, but Ajax now woke up. With a yell that brought the crowd on the hillside to their feet, he launched his steers at the third Knuckle. His whip rang and whined and zipped through the air. In passionate human-like tones it coaxed, it implored, it threatened, and now and then culminated in a fearful crack that could be heard a mile away.

Under this heroic treatment, through a cloud of dust that half

buried them, yet with a line as straight as an arrow, the American string cleared the third Knuckle, now only four seconds to the bad.

They were at last within cheering distance of the top, and that grin, stretching from ear to ear on the face of Ajax, indicated that something was about to happen. It came like a clap of thunder, a prolonged yell of "Bu-la-la! Bu-la-la!" from the lusty throats of the whole American colony and the hundreds of friendly Kaffirs lined up on either side, and like a squadron of cavalry the terrified oxen rushed at the fourth and last Devil's Knuckle.

Every pinch of gold dust in Pilgrim's Rest, more than half the real property of that mining camp, such as stores and saloons, and the majority of claims of the adjacent country, hung in the balance, liable to change hands in the twinkle of an eye.

The voice of Ajax could be distinguished amid the din, encouraging his string in thunder-like tones, and now, suddenly passing with a rush from the rear to the head of his column of plowing, foam-flanked oxen, he fired a final volley of deafening cracks and led the way over the line in a whirlwind finish, a victor by a margin of three seconds.

So the Stars and Stripes waved for one day from the British flagpole at Pilgrim's Rest, and when the flag was taken down Pilgrim's Rest followed it. California Joe took possession of the stores which he had won on the race and moved them a mile and a half down the creek, where the American claims were located, and his countrymen, conforming to his patriotic example, straightway removed all the buildings that they had won — which comprised almost the whole of Pilgrim's Rest — to the same locality.

The Post Office went also, for it had been wagered and lost on the great race at Devil's Knuckles.

So not only did the string of little coal-black Zulu steers, driven by the giant Ajax, hoist the Stars and Stripes over Pilgrim's Rest, but also drew Pilgrim's Rest after the American flag into American-ruled territory.

Miss Hanscombe — Stenographer.*

BY STANLEY JOHNSON.

ISS HANSCOMBE, will you please look over these reports. I shall be too busy today to do it; but I must know in a few words what is in them to report to the directors tomorrow. I shall, of course, look them over myself, later."

Miss Hanscombe came for them and, returning to her desk, was soon as oblivious of the rest of the world as if she were reading the most popular current novel.

Two hours later she placed on her employer's desk a neatly executed typewritten abstract of their contents. During her luncheon hour she reviewed the four years she had served as the private stenographer of Kenniston Bradley, the much overworked treasurer of "The United Metals and Supply Company of America."

She recalled the day she came, when Mr. Bradley had taken pains to tell her that she was an experiment.

"Mr. Corcoran, my last stenographer, was perfect in his execution; but unfortunately he would go on sprees, and has several times left me in the lurch, when I needed him most. There had been several before him, all excellent, but *none* absolutely reliable; that quality I must have. Hence, against my best judgment I've come to employ you,— that is I mean a woman. Oh, I did not mean just that,— but, you know, in business ——"

The sentence was never finished; Mr. Bradley seemed to feel that excuses were hopeless, and wisely stopped short. Miss Hanscombe happily discovered, in the apparently rude remark, a compliment to her sex.

She smiled as she recalled the scene. She traced the change that had come over him from that day to this. How her field of usefulness had widened in an almost imperceptible manner, just as

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a great river broadens towards its mouth. It was a matter of conscious pride to her that today she had given the treasurer the very words that he would use at a meeting of the directors of a great corporation.

Then all these reflections ended in a sigh,— one of those unconscious sighs, which others notice, but which we ourselves hardly realize.

That evening Miss Hanscombe read in the public library, and beside her, looking over the various magazines in a desultory manner, was the cause of the sigh,— Holton Dodge.

This man embodied the ideal of Miss Hanscombe's simple, painstaking life. All the pictures of her imagination, all the scenes of her day dreams, were so many portraits of him. And this began long before she had written the confidential letters of the treasurer of the United Metals and Supply Company of America.

She read in silence for over an hour. Her evening's bill of fare had been an article on the Boers, a critic's analysis of Dante's Purgatorio, and for dessert a story by Henry James. Then she turned with a glance of contented happiness to her lover. They rose, and quietly left the reading room.

Miss Hanscombe gave her mind a pasturage of an hour or more each day. "I can be with you, Holton, just the same," she said, "and there is no rest more satisfactory than reading,— with you near by."

In Miss Hanscombe's eyes, her lover was an ideal man. He also represented a very real fact — a woman's love. She held radical ideas of her own on the subject. The world would have certainly considered the question a debatable one; but with her it was an axiom.

Miss Hanscombe was not indifferently pretty. Yet she was all that the world — the often mistaken world — supposes the genus stenographer is not. Her hair curled easily about her neck, and had an attractive way of straying down her forehead. She preserved an unvarying neatness about her person. Every point of her being spoke eloquently of health — both of mind and body.

Later impressions of Miss Hanscombe would be that she was purposeful — at least to the point of gaining from life the best that was in it. Her perception of the highest good was higher than

the average. The mutual friends of the lovers never ceased to wonder upon what common ground they stood. None approved of the marriage that was to take place some time in the remote future. As the years flew by, and their devotion to each other grew stronger, the outside world feared for Miss Hanscombe's happiness. She herself would have insisted that they were entirely suited to each other.

She had been tested in many ways; yet in some matters she had had no experience to guide her. But even in these she held theories, and to them she had no doubt she would adhere, were she to face the real exigencies.

In the business world she was Miss Hanscombe — Stenographer, always. She never forgot the words, which were her introduction to her employer. During the first few months, Mr. Bradley addressed her only concerning her duties. But in this brief period he observed certain traits which differentiated Miss Hanscombe, the stenographer, from Miss Hanscombe, the woman.

The fact that she surpassed any man who had held the same position, quite possibly did not influence him to accept her as a type of her sex. But he soon became accustomed to her presence, and his self-imposed invasion of his private office by a woman lost its fearfulness.

At the end of her first six months he realized the value of her services enough to tell her, in his direct, business-like manner, that she was entitled to a higher salary.

"You are worth as much as a man to me, Miss Hanscombe, hence I feel that you should be paid as much. In fact, I'm bound to say that you surpass any man I ever had in the office."

Miss Hanscombe's "thank you" betrayed no surprise. More of the responsible duties of the business rested upon her shoulders as time passed. Often, when the day's work slackened up, her employer talked with her on subjects he was wont to discuss with older men at his club — books and politics, art and philosophy, and the plainer problems of life. He was somewhat surprised with himself at first; he had a doubt of the propriety of a high-class business man discussing such matters with his stenographer. Then he realized that his stock of information was invariably enriched by it. He talked on the same subjects with more relish and under-

standing at his club, and they remarked that "Bradley was becoming a deuced clever conversationalist."

Kenniston Bradley had never married. The feminine world was a loser thereby, for he had all the elements that go to the making of a good husband. His business life was so strenuous that he wanted nothing outside of his office but rest and peace. The world knew him only as a thorough business man. "None better," they would say. He had, in fact, developed his corporation from a provincial into a cosmopolitan organization.

He had been inclined to congratulate himself upon his single state. The only feminine touches in his life, in fact, were furnished by Miss Hanscombe — and by no means of her seeking.

The transition into conversational relations was quite as imperceptible to Miss Hanscombe. She enjoyed sharpening the edges of her own ideas. "Holton, although he is very dear to me, has no taste for good conversation," she would think to herself.

Superiority, fortunately, as far as human commodities go, has not yet been cornered by those who compose the ruling class. It is the word of all others which most fitly described Miss Hanscombe. And yet she would not have been able to understand why her simple attainments were not within the reach of all.

Nothing would have surprised or horrified her more than the discovery that her employer's interest in her should develop into something deeper. It would have been equally amazing to him. Yet his gentle feminine friends would have said that it was the inevitable and logical result of propinquity.

Miss Hanscombe had never mentioned her lover within the four business walls of her daily routine. She had resolved that she and Holton Dodge were to marry, some day — when he succeeded. But he had never yet succeeded. Much as his poor existence meant to Miss Hanscombe, he was, unfortunately, of no consequence to anyone else. His life thus far was a failure. There were many months when he had nothing to do, and had it not been for Miss Hanscombe's savings, he would have been in want. Miss Hanscombe deemed it the fault of an unappreciative world — and the world had other views.

Kenniston Bradley was getting several years away from forty. The fact occurred to him more frequently as time went on. He

pictured himself as an old man, retired from business, with plenty of money, but with no real home or companionship. Then, in his own practical manner, he decided to win Miss Hanscombe as his wife. He had not come to the conclusion without realizing that it would be a great shock to the little social group in which he moved. But that was mostly the club now — women had given him up and ceased to pester him. Miss Hanscombe fitted the picture of what he desired as a home. It gave him visions of pleasant evenings, reading and discussing matters of real importance. Companionship has a big rôle to play in the drama of love when a man is over forty.

Business customs had become so much a habit with him that he was absurdly deficient, when he approached a campaign of courtship. It was a part of his commercial code to find how the other man stood before he committed himself. It would be better, he decided, to know Miss Hanscombe's mind before he revealed his own.

He had talked with her on almost every topic except love; her views in this he did not know. He found it an extremely difficult subject to approach, with her.

One day Miss Hanscombe came in with a copy of a leading review, which she had been reading during the noon hour. He picked it up, and noted that the leaves were cut where there was an article on divorce by a leading reformer.

"Ah, Miss Hanscombe!" he exclaimed, "Have you any interest in this topic?" And he placed his finger on the title of the article.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Bradley," she replied. "So few people realize the fearful recklessness, the outrageous thoughtlessness and ignorance with which marriage is treated in these days."

"You amaze me, Miss Hanscombe!" In the vernacular of the telephone, Mr. Bradley was connected and was listening.

"It is a dreadful stain upon our civilization," Miss Hanscombe continued. "We need a national divorce law, Mr. Bradley, more than we need an army or a navy. Our present laws allow a most atrocious state of affairs. The way marriages are contracted and abandoned is, to my mind, a greater stain on our country than the massacres in Turkey, or even the affair at Kishineff."

"I am very much surprised," Mr. Bradley interjected, using the bellows to fan the flames. "Just think, Miss Hanscombe, of being lashed like sailors to the mast, to some useless, shipwrecked creature——"

"A very excellent simile, Mr. Bradley. It expresses just what I mean. The frightfulness of it all lies in this, that we and our courts regard so lightly the most solemn and most sacred of all human contracts. You, yourself, make contracts in business which, if you broke them, would make you feel that your business reputation had been shattered. When people marry the world is called in to witness, and it is advertised widely that a life contract has been entered into, by a man and a woman. But our courts permit such contracts to be broken on the most trivial grounds. In my opinion, there should be no divorce."

"Well, I must say, Miss Hanscombe, you astonish me. In fact, I've never really given the matter much serious attention, as I see you have. But it has seemed to me that there are many occasions, when it was certainly a blessing to——"

"Mr. Bradley," Miss Hanscombe interrupted, "when I marry a man it will be because I love him. It will make no difference to me, as far as my devotion is concerned, if he turns out to be a drunkard, a ne'er do well, or even a criminal. I shall never forget that I am his wife, and that, because he is what he is, he needs me. He may be cruel, may cause me infinite suffering. He may be despised by everyone else. Is that the time for me to tear myself away from him? To join the rest of the world and cast him away? *Then,* if love and marriage mean anything, is the time for me to prove my fidelity to the solemn contract I made with him. To help him and be true to him, and by making him feel that one person is staunch and devoted to him, to raise him and give him courage for better things!" There were tears on Miss Hanscombe's flushed face when she had finished.

Her employer looked thoughtful. "Miss Hanscombe," he faltered, "you have the best ideals in life that I have ever heard expressed. To win you, I should regard as the greatest honor a man could wish. To be worthy of your love——"

"You do not understand," she interrupted. "To be *unworthy* would be my test of a man. I trust I could endure it."

He seized the moment. "Miss Hanscombe, I've long realized that you — that I — well, really, it's hard to express it," he said, smiling, "but for a long time, to tell you directly, I've wanted to win you as my wife! Will you marry me?"

"No, Mr. Bradley," she replied. "I was engaged before I ever knew you. I have chosen the man I shall marry. I love him, I am sure — shall love him always — as the service says, 'for better or for worse.'"

Kenniston Bradley showed his astonishment in a way that was not pleasant to see. Then he turned suddenly, and with more emotion than he had exhibited in years, extended his hand.

"Miss Hanscombe, I want to thank you for what you have been to me for so many years. I've shown you some appreciation, I hope. Now let things go on as before. I've no more profound respect for any one than for you, — and for your lover, whoever the fortunate man may be, my sincere congratulations."

When Holton Dodge was out of work, Miss Hanscombe generally helped to find a place. A few weeks after these events, an important vacancy took place in the United Metals and Supply Company. She told him to apply for it, and he sent in his references.

"This is the place that will end all our waiting, dearest," she said. "You'll have to travel for them for a while; but later there will be a place in the firm for a faithful fellow like you."

A few days later, Mr. Bradley handed a letter to Miss Hanscombe. "You just answer that for me," he said. "You know what to say. Just thank him for saving us."

As he went out, Miss Hanscombe picked up the letter, and went to her desk. It read as follows:—

MY DEAR BRADLEY:—

Answering your inquiry, I could not advise you to engage Holton Dodge. He was with us for about a year, when we discovered there was something wrong with his money returns to the cashier.

We confronted him with the facts, and he broke down and confessed. In some way, he secured enough money to make the firm whole, — I believe by some story he told to his sweetheart. She, I understand, is a saving little woman, and worships him. She knows nothing about the fellow, and will have to marry him to find out, I suppose. We pitied him enough to give him a letter that we had employed him. Since then he has been in half a dozen different places.

I have too high a regard for you and our business relations, not to give you the facts, — of course in the strictest confidence.

Very truly yours,

C. L. CLEMENT,
Mg'r Federal Lead Co.

Miss Hanscombe swayed for a second in her chair and sobbed. But in a moment she struck the keys in her usual gentle, sure manner. She placed the letters on her employer's desk. Her day's work was ended; she put on her jacket and walked out.

The Pine Needle Trail.*

BY VIRGINIA M. CORNELL.

"THERE it is again," said the man riding in front, "there at your left, see?"

His companion leaned to look at the spot indicated. "It hasn't missed a rod since we struck it back where the road comes up the mountain," he said. "Stinson," turning to address the third man, who acted as guide to the other two, "you know all things, what's the meaning of this phenomenon?"

The guide's eyes took in the object of interest — a broken twig of pine by the roadside — noting with a casual glance of comprehension the green spikes strewn at intervals behind and ahead of them.

"Oh, that," said he; "that's Pine Needle Jim's trail. He's come up the mountain at the gap back yonder. Been in town givin' hisself up again, likely."

"Giving himself up?" questioned the other.

"To th' law, you know. You gentlemen never hear of Pine Needle Jim in your travels?"

"Oh, unfold your tale, Stinson," interposed the man who had first spoken. "I allowed — if you'll excuse my vernacular — that you'd have one."

A slight lighting of the eyes in the guide's bearded face indicated his acceptance of the charge.

"Most people hereabouts could tell you about Jim," he observed. "We'll pass his shack farther on at the side of Island Creek Basin. We can go by an' take a look at the Basin if you-all wish to; strangers generally are fond of seein' it."

He did not add that strangers were often fond of listening to his own voice and speech; possibly he did not know it, yet it was true. He was a typical example of the finest of mountaineer manhood,

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splendid of physique, with a contrasting unconscious grace of address and movement, and a voice that had the semblance of something silvery and sweet in tone. Coming out of his powerful chest, this was agreeably noticeable, as was his habitual grave gentleness. The two men prospecting in the interests of the Alabama Coal and Iron Company had found him surprisingly companionable, and he had relieved the tedium of many long mountain rides for them.

"He lives all by himself, his shack almost hangin' over th' edge of the Basin," Stinson continued, "like it might fall in any moment. He spends a lot of time lyin' by it lookin' over. Some day he'll tumble in.

"Jim killed a man once at the foot of th' gap you recollect passin'. The two 'd had words an' both men had their guns. As soon as it come to him what he'd done he rode into town an' give hisself up to th' marshal, tellin' him he'd jest killed Polk Harbook, an' his body was a lyin' by the big spring at th' foot of th' gap.

"'I done it in hot anger,' he told him, 'but hit's done an' done, an' I'm willin' to pay the penalty.'

"He lay in jail for months, an' hit 'peared to wear on him powerful — See, there's his trail again; he's crossed to the right here — 'specially as his sister Rainie, who'd been Polk's wife, an' was the one they'd had the words over, died durin' the time without leavin' no kind of a message for him. He'd raised her from a baby, them two bein' all they was of th' fam'ly, an' hit was generally allowed that bein' Polk Harbook's wife wasn't akin to bein' in heaven." Stinson paused, the appreciative lighting of his face again showing.

"At least those that hadn't never been hit thought so; Rainie herself seemed to 'low that if she couldn't be one she'd try the other; she'd drooped from the moment the news come to her. Droll, them kind of things are, aren't they?

"Jim was cleared at his trial, the jury knowin' both men, an' 'lowin', I reckon, that Polk needed his killin', but Jim was never right afterwards; hit appeared he couldn't get it in his mind that th' law had really freed him from the charge of murderin' Polk, an' direc'ly he got a habit of goin' about once a month an' givin'

hisself up, like he done th' first time. His idea in strowin' these bits of pine bresh is that th' officers can track him by them when they come out after him. He thinks the body's a layin' by the spring yet. Hit all appears to seem as real to him as it did the day he done th' shootin' — that's been twenty years ago I reckon."

"Twenty years!" Both listeners gasped. "That's the biggest yet," said one. "Do you mean to say ——"

"I was busy growin' a mustache an' gettin' ready to vote," the guide spoke reflectively, the momentary twinkle of his grave eyes lighting them. "I've celebrated my fortieth birthday since. Hit just seems to me like one of the things I've always been a knowin' to. Hit couldn't have been long after the first crazy spell struck him that he took to strowin' the pine bresh — leavin' his trail, he calls it. Yonder in th' middle of th' road's another. They make quite a showin' in these sandy spots, don't they — green an' pretty? You'd think he'd get it all plundered after awhile, but you can see," — curving his arm into a sweep of the landscape where spots of vivid green brightened the leafless winter woods, — "they's still a plenty; enough to last as long as Jim does.

"But twenty years!" one of the prospectors spoke incredulously. "That's a long time, man, too long for a crazy notion like that to stay in the poor fellow's brain. It sets one to wondering how long he will keep it up."

"Twenty more, it might be," answered Stinson. "There's no tellin' how long people can stand things sometimes. Jim's not plumb wild only by spells — when he takes them starts to run like he done when he first come out of jail, an' was standin' by Rainie's grave, — an' of course he gets over them an' rests up some before he takes another. Something must have give way in his brain at that time. I reckon hit come over him heavier than he could bear, what he'd done, an' how he was left alone with both their deaths on him; — I suppose he'd feel that way, Polk's wife dyin' like she did without a word for him. They say he gave a terrible cry, more like an animal than a man, an' started runnin' from somethin' he seemed to think was behind him. They found him the next day, face down on the side of th' mountain, wore out. He'd run for miles. I've saw him take that same start twice, an' hit's something a man don't forget soon. He's plumb wild with fear while

it's on him; you can't stop him, an' he'd tear through anything; but he remembers to snatch at every pine bush he passes on th' way. I've known him tracked by that to where he'd be a lyin'. People used to go out to hunt him, thinkin' he might die out in the woods somewhere. Other times he's mostly all right except appearin' tired like, an' always havin' th' idea that he's got a punishment comin' to him. He thinks now there's goin' to be a posse sent out after him, an' he always keeps ready to go with 'em. A heap of people amuses themselves with him, lettin' him tell his story to one an' another about doin' the shootin', an' the body a layin' by th' spring, an' so on. After this long hit can't help seemin' funny.

"Oh, yes, I've heard him. I was in town last court time, an' Jim was there with his poke full of pine bresh slung over his shoulder — when he gets where hit's scarce he always totes it with him. Hit's a sight to see him, his stoopin' shoulders an' grizzly beard, an' his pitiful, waitin' face with th' old slouch hat pulled down over it. Folks was havin' all kinds of fun followin' him around an' gettin' him to tell his tale. He was up in front of a young fellow at one of th' clerk's desks when I went in the court room; I could tell his voice, tired like — I suppose he'd been havin' it over all day — ''Twould favor me to have you send as soon as possible. I've been ready to come a good while.'

"'All right, Jim,' says the young clerk in a brisk voice; 'We'll be out this evenin' or tomorrow sure. Hit's a powerful busy time with us, but we'll try hard to make it by tomorrow mornin' certain. We don't want dangerous criminals like you loose any longer than's necessary.' The crowd laughed, an' Jim looked from one to another tryin' to understand.

"'No,' he says, anxious like, 'No, I wouldn't want to be a danger to no one. I only done it in anger, gentlemen,' turnin' to the crowd an' sort of wavin' his hands, explainin' it. 'Only in hot anger — I wouldn't have killed even him no other way. Hit's been a long time,' he says, beginnin' to speak low to hisself — 'a long time. I've been a waitin' — waitin' ——'

"'An' where 'd you say th' body was?' Some fool was askin' the question to get him started again. He come back willin'ly, like he wanted to oblige 'em.

"'Hit's a layin' by the big spring, right at the foot of th' gap,'

he says, looking around an' tryin' to pick out the man who'd spoken. Hit tickles some people mightily, hearin' him have it over, always just the same, patient an' gentle. 'Hit were done in anger, you know, an' I'm jest a waitin' to pay th' penalty.'

"'Then you'll try to be out this evenin'?' He'd turned back to the clerk who'd begun th' foolin'. 'I've been waitin' a long time; I'd love to git it off my mind.'

"'Oh, yes, we'll be out,' the clerk says. 'Reckon you'll come peaceable, Jim? An' by the way,' noticin' the poke over his shoulder, 'how'll we find you? You might be gone from home, you know,' winkin' the other eye, but keepin' a mighty grave face for Jim.

"He pulls his old poke around so's they could all look at what was in it. 'Oh, I'll leave my trail,' he says, eager as can be, "I always leave my trail, gentlemen, an' I'll come peaceable. I'll be glad to git it off my mind. I've been waitin' a long time now——'"

Stinson leaned down to toss aside with his riding whip a bunch of green spikes lying in the sandy road. "'Tis kind of queer when you come to think of it how long he's been a doin' this," he said, reflectively. "'Tain't so surprisin' he's tired."

Neither of the others spoke, and the three horses paced side by side, their hoofbeats falling soft and muffled in the sandy soil. The late part of the evening was approaching, and the creep of nightfall could be felt in the air. In the woods, with the lonely road ahead, this was the more noticeable, and the slight rising wind in the leafless trees gave forth an old, foreboding sound, that began to cast its spell upon the two least familiar with it. Unconsciously to them, it lent color and effect to the other's just finished tale; the tragedy of the pitifully crazed brain sustained through long years, forced itself sharply upon them.

"Confound you, Stinson!" said one of them, half laughing, but touching his horse impatiently, at which all three quickened their gait, "you get on a fellow's nerves with your crazy Jim and his 'pine bresh.' What a liar you are, anyhow!"

When they had gone a few rods farther, a distant murmur reached the guide's accustomed ears.

"Hear that rushin' noise louder 'n the wind in th' trees?" he

asked. "That's Island Creek goin' over the falls. We'll come to th' ford direc'ly; hit's jest above. If you-all would love to call on Jim, his shack's jest off the road on th' fur side. But the sightliest place for a view o' th' Basin is about midway of it, this side th' stream. From that point hit looks round as a cup, an' the sides straight down. The creek starts off the mountain there; the first drop's about a hundred feet. You-all c'n hear it now, can't you?"

The two men caught the sound. "How far is it?" asked one.

"Half a mile or about so. The water's low, an' don't make much fuss goin' down. After our heavy rains you can hear it boomin' like a cannon all over th' country."

A little farther and a rise of ground was observable through the thinning timber, and the rush of water sounded nearer.

"Straight ahead through the woods is th' spot I was tellin' you of," said Stinson. "The road bends to the right an' crosses th' ford. Jim's left it here," he added, "do you see?"

He pointed to where the clusters of green spikes ceased showing upon the yellow ribbon ahead, then reined his horse a little into the woods toward the left, his keen eyes taking at a glance a large scope of the leafy ground under the naked trees. "Here you are!" he said presently, and the two prospectors, spurring their horses, came up with him to look with interest at the freshly broken, jagged branch of pine lying upon the dead leaves. "Yonder's another," he said, pointing. "Now, with you gentlemen's permission, I'll find out how good you are at followin' a trail."

The green-spiked branches were more irregular in distance here, and scattered as though strewn in the greatest haste. But, with the aid of the guide, the two men were able to go from one to another, and congratulated themselves upon their woodcraft.

"What would bring him out here, Stinson?" asked one. "Reckon he heard us and thought the posse was after him?"

"Took one of those 'running starts' we've been learning about, more likely," remarked the other, viewing their guide with good-natured sarcasm. "He'll run off the bank if he isn't careful, won't he, old man?"

"He might," replied Stinson, seriously. "Hit's a bad place for a start here." He was looking along the line of broken branches

ahead, his gaze intent and troubled. But after a little, seeing nothing unusual, he returned to his easy, companionable manner.

"We'll have to make our look at th' Basin short," he observed, "Hit's goin' to be night direc'ly, an' we've several miles of road ahead before supper an' a place to sleep at." Yet still, as he went on, accepting with quiet amusement the occasional jocose references of the others to the "pine needle trail," the man to whom it was familiar continued to look through the fading daylight for another familiar sight, — a stooping, pathetic figure with a grizzled beard and a slouched hat shading its face.

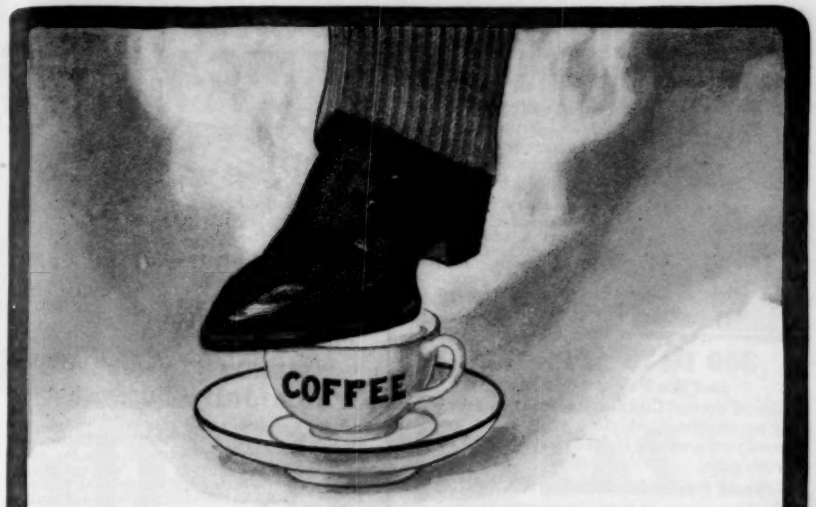
"Jim!" he called, after one of these long looks, "O Jim!"

"But Jim answers not," one commented, humorously. "And it's been some moments since we've found any 'pine bresh' as you observe. He's fooled us and gone home another way."

"We call your bluff, old man!" laughed the other. "You laid the trail yourself, and made your tale to fit it. I told you you were lying!"

The guide shrugged his shoulders, smiling, then suddenly bent forward to listen. His ears had caught a sound other than the falling water. "Hush a minute," he said, "I heard a scream!"

He galloped ahead, and in a few bounds through the short, stunted undergrowth bordering its banks, reached the side of the Basin. Pulling up his horse, he slipped to the ground, and holding cautiously the bridle rein, took a step or two forward and leaned over the edge. The two others had followed him, and as they came nearer, alighted, leading their horses. At a gesture from him, they approached the spot where Stinson stood, and, startled, gazed with him far out and down over the darkling waters of Island Creek Basin, to where, upon its foam-flecked ripples, danced an old slouched hat among clusters of green-spiked branches — the end of the pine needle trail! Then, with heads uncovered, they turned away.



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